TOWN MAKING IN THE ERA OF GOOD FEELINGS: KENTUCKY 1814-1820

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"Gain! Gain! Gain! is the beginning, the middle and the end, the alpha and omega of the founders of American towns." Thus did Morris Birkbeck characterize the new town fever that swept the country between 1815 and 1820.[1] An advertisement could transform farm acreage into a future metropolis with town lots and out lots. Wide avenues and public squares could be surveyed and lots for the university, library and other urban institutions laid aside without so much as disturbing a single bear, wolf or squirrel.

Kentucky had been with grandiose schemes before 1814, but by 1815 three forces had converged to set off "city" speculation on a large scale.[2] The Battle of Thames, October 5, 1813, gave Kentuckians a feeling of safety for the first time since Hull surrendered Detroit early in the War of 1812. The fact that Lexington, Cincinnati and Louisville had become sizeable settlements gave credence to the belief that new towns would grow into cities. And reflecting a national trend, the almost simultaneous news of the victory at New Orleans and the Treaty of Ghent, sent the nation pell mell into a period of exuberant optimism. Even before the Battle of New Orleans, advertisements appeared offering lots in Portland[3] and out lots in Newport[4] for sale.

In 1815 lots in the new town of Covington were offered for sale by R. M. Gano, Thomas D. Carneal and John S. Gano.[5] Not all were sold and a second sale was advertised two months later. As late as 1824

there were still 181 lots unsold.[5] It should not be supposed that because Covington is now the third largest city in the Commonwealth that those who invested made a fortune. A Cincinnatian of 1845 remembered the Covington of 1825 as "a little hamlet, with an ambitious dwelling or two perched on the high bank of the Licking, its dozen or so of small frames and log cabins scattered between these and the Ohio." During the winter months it was as "cold and desolate almost as a Scotch moor." Worm-fences, sheep, cows and "sweet-smelling meadow-land" made up the town of Covington.[6] Except in the case of those who held on for long periods of time, it was the proprietors, who sold the original lots, not the buyers, who made the most money.[7] As frequently as not, many buyers defaulted on tax payments. The Louisville Western Courier of September 21, 1815, listed 143 lots in the town of Middletown, Jefferson County for sale. Assuming that the highest lot number represents the total number, only seventy were unsold.

Living in the future was a characteristic of town promoting. Like a growth stock, it was the rate of growth and future prospects that kept the price up and any unfavorable news might result in a dizzy drop in property values. By 1816 town promoters were emphasizing nearness to cities and the fact or intention of their being on the main route of travel between cities. Isaac Watkins of Shelbyville, in promoting Simpsonville, declared that "it is contemplated that at the next session of the Legislature, application will be made to incorporate a company, for the purpose of turnpiking the great state road, leading from Frankfort to Louisville."[8]

The use of urban place names was not uncommon. Thus that "large and beautiful bottom known by the name of M'Cool's bottom," when advertised by Samuel Sanders became Ghent.[9] Similarly an ancient seaport was resurrected for a townsite eight miles from Louisville, UTICA.[10] A favorite method of spreading the word was to place an advertisement in one newspaper and in that ad requesting other specified papers to copy the item and to send their bills either direct or to the first newspaper office for payment. Since editors exchanged papers extensively, this saved postage, though the vagaries of the mail were such that it did not guarantee publication. Transylvania, eight miles above Louisville was advertised in the Western Courier and should have been picked up by the Argus, Reporter and Repositor.

As new towns multiplied, a new sophistication appeared in their advertisements. Thus Transylvania at the "mouth of Harrod's Creek" was "unquestionably the best port on the Ohio" and had the advantage, dubious as it might be, of being "immediately opposite the new town of Utica."[12] Likewise Shippingsport directly below the Falls of the Ohio was touted as "the natural and inevitable port of navigation with New-Orleans, Saint Louis and all other places situated on the Mississippi, Missouri, and the tributary streams emptying therein.[13]

It appears that 1818 produced more new Kentucky towns than any other single year. Simpson's Ferry became Marion, Gallatin County, half way between Cincinnati and Louisville,[14] Manchester and Savannah were also offered for sale.[15] Francesburg "near Highland Creek, Union County" had a fairly unpretentious name, but its backers claimed its

location was "surpassed by no site on the river below Louisville."[16] Dover's name was more pretentious and the proprieors had high hopes for the wood be city at "the mouth of Lee's Creek." They declared that "a delightful road can be got up the hill leading to Minerva." However not only did they have to contend with the old Mason County settlements of Maysville and Washington, but also with other new towns. The advertisements were hopeful, however. "Calais, which lays just opposite, and Ripley three miles above, from the narrowness of the river and other disadvantages can never cope with Dover."[17] Dover still exists but its population is far below that necessary to give it city status. Other new towns of 1818 included Martinsburg and Owingsville.[18]

Eighteen hundred and nineteen spawned almost the same number of towns as the preceding year,[19] but the Panic of 1819 burst the bubble. Pessimism replaced optimism. Amos Edwards who was active in the establishment of Elba, thirteen miles from Russellville on the "Wolf Lick fork of Muddy River," was first in the list of proprietors of Cumberland, and is listed with others with respect to Logan City twelve miles from Russellville on the Clarksville road.[20] The same Russellville papers informed the public of Barnersville and Ragarsville, the latter "recently laid off by order of the honorable court of Christian."[21] The most extensively advertised Kentucky new town of 1819 was Palermo, Union County, "immediately opposite the mouth of the Saline." The Pittsburgh Gazette and the Cincinnati Advertiser as well as Kentucky papers carried news of the place that was "destined to become one of the great places on the whole river for steam works, having an inexhaustable coal mine within half a mile of the river, and the coal not above a foot below

the surface." Not only that, it also contained "one of the richest iron ore banks in the western country."[22] The last of the 1819 towns to be boosted was Owensborough as it was then spelled.[23]

Later there were additional new towns in Kentucky as the legislature split off parts of old counties to form new ones and real or imagined county seat towns were boosted. Nationally there were two additional peak periods for town boosting: one during the years preceding the Panic of 1837 and the other preceding the Panic of 1857. But it was town promotion with a difference. The primitive chart and the glowing, deterministic description of natural advantages were not so important. Colorful lithographs and talk of projected railroads were the new come-ons.[24]

Many of the new towns failed to survive. The 1950 Ohio River Handbook and Picture Album only shows a drainage ditch where Palermo was supposed to rise. Yet others thrived as Owensboro, Newport and Covington attest. Kentucky though an agricultural state had urban aspirations. Much of the inspiration for internal improvements in the state were derived from the growth psychology and the emphasis on developing hinterland which can be seen most strikingly in the attempted sale of would-be cities, 1814-1820.

1. Morris Birkbeck as quoted by Walter Havighurst, Wilderness for Sale: The Story of the First Western Land Rush (New York, 1956), 106.

2. For Centreville, Livingston County, see Russellville Mirror, June 16, 1808; for Lystra and Franklinville see John W. Reps, Town Planning in Frontier America (Princeton, 1969), 269-271.

3. Louisville Western Courier March 7, 1814. Much of this story will be presented in "The Cincinnati-Louisville Rivalry and the Making of the Louisville & Portland Canal, 1815-1830."

4. Cincinnati Western Spy August 6, 1814.

5. Ibid., February 11, April 15, 1815; Margaret Strebel Hartman, "Glimpses of Covington through 1839 and 1840," (revised), 14. This is located at the Covington Public Library. See also p. 8 for prices at the first sale which averaged over $300 per lot.

6. Covington Licking Valley Register June 14, 1845, from the Cincinnati Gazette.

7. Compare with the town of Portland. William Lytle wrote Edward Livingston of New Orleans, January 14, 1814, that $100,00 to $200,000 would be a fair price for the land between the road connecting Louisville and Portland and the Ohio River. By October 3, 1817, he was asking $500,000. Notation on David McClellan to William Lytle, September 22, 1817, William Lytle Papers, Cincinnati Historical Society. That there were connections between speculations can be seen by the information that T. D. Carneal sold out his Ohio Canal Company stock to Lytle. This company was interested primarily in land speculation in the Portland area. Carneal was one of the three proprietors of Covington. James Prentiss to William Lytle, January 19, 1815, William Lytle Papers, Cincinnati Historical Society.

8. Louisville Correspondent November 25, 1816,

9. Cincinnati Western Spy January 12, 1816.

10. Louisville Correspondent, July 1, 1816.

11. Louisville Western Courier August 1, 1816.

12. Louisville Correspondent April 26, 1817.

13. Cincinnati Western Spy June 6, 1817. Other 1817 new towns included Seventy-six, Joseph William Wells, History of Cumberland County (Louisville, 1947), 178 and Mount Vernon, Louisville Correspondent April 26, 1817.

14. Louisville Public Advertiser September 22, 1818; Cincinnati Western Spy September 26, 1818; See also Lexington Reporter September 9, 1818.

15. Frankfort Argus November 20, 1818; Lexington Reporter October 28, 1818.

16. Lexington Reporter December 9, 1818.

17. Ibid., September 2, 1818.

18. Wells, Cumberland County, 178; Lexington Reporter March 4, 1818. The first two sales of Owingsville lots were July 13, 1812 and July 14, 1814, John A. Richards, A History of Bath County, Kentucky (Yuma, 1961). The 1818 sale was of all unsold lots.

19. Without comparable runs of newspapers for 1818 and 1819 it is nearly impossible to make an objective evaluation as to which was the peak year. The availability of Russellville papers for 1819 skews the picture considerably.

20. Russellville Messenger March 27, 1819; Russellville Mirror May 21, 1819.

21. Russellville Mirror May 21, 1819; Russellville Messenger February 4, 1819.

22. Frankfort Argus August 13, 1819; Cincinnati Advertiser September 14, 1819; Pittsburgh Gazette September 3, 1819.

23. Frankfort Argus December 17, 1819. See Hugh O. Potter, Daviess County Sesquicentennial Historical Factbook (Owensboro, 1965), cover, for December 30, 1816, plat as Rossville~~boro~~.

24. E.g. Frankfort Commonwealth April 11, 1835 for Midway "on the Railroad" and the Maysville Tri-weekly Eagle May 10, 1855 for Morganza at the junction of three railroads at the mouth of the Big Sandy.